



FAMILY GUIDE TO MEANINGFUL FUNERALS:

Getting Facts & Feelings Right

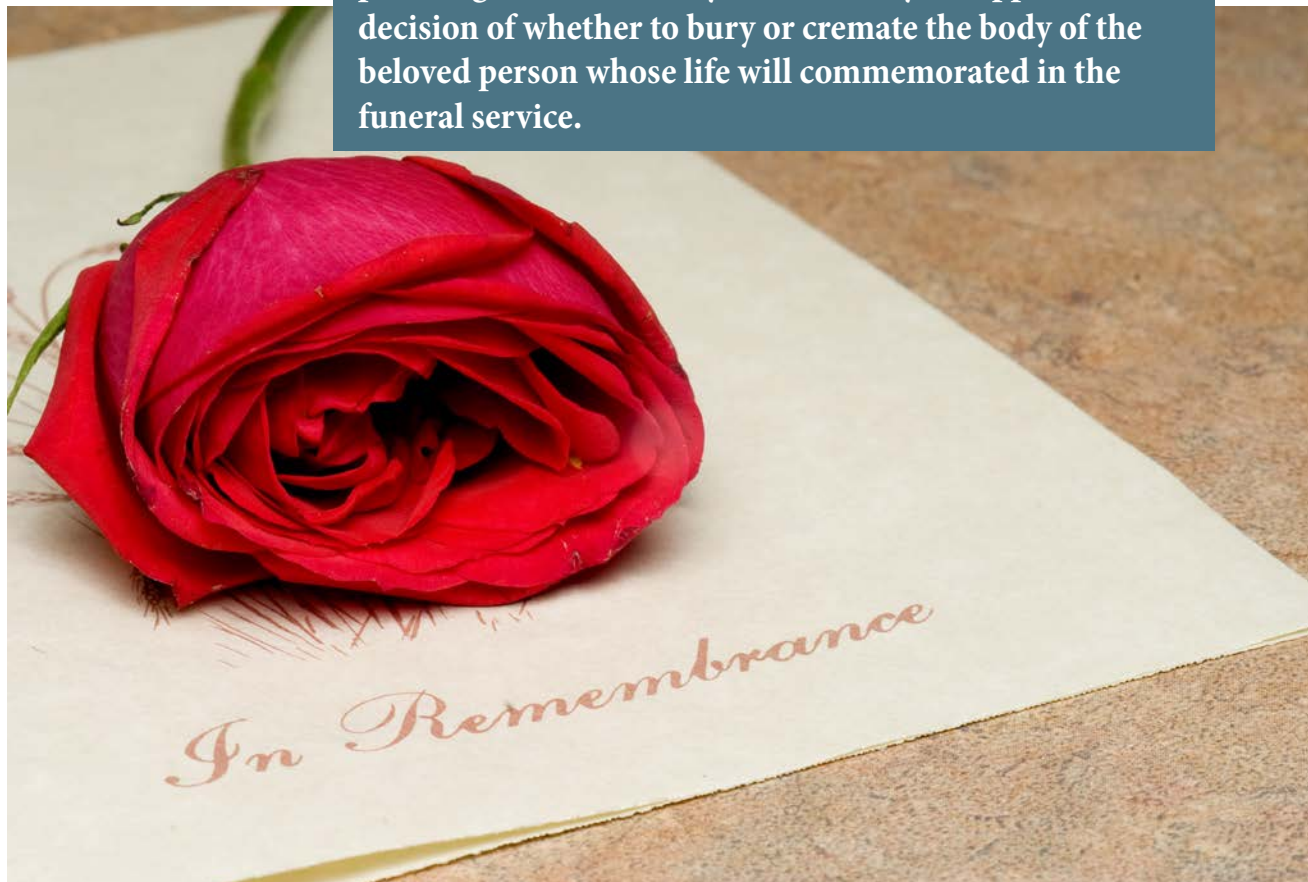
Meaningful: Having a serious, important or useful quality or purpose; communicating something that is not expressed directly

Memorable: Worth remembering or easily remembered, especially because of being special or unusual.

THE BASIC DECISION – BURIAL OR CREMATION

When it comes to planning funerals, Americans are divided roughly equally between choosing burial or cremation.

Every family's situation is unique and personal, so just as there are strong traditions involved in any kind of funeral planning, there are many different ways to approach the decision of whether to bury or cremate the body of the beloved person whose life will be commemorated in the funeral service.



Sometimes the decision of whether to be cremated or buried is made by the person beforehand, and sometimes it needs to be made by the family, but many other important decisions about the funeral proceed from this first decision. It isn't always an easy choice because unless there's a clear preference the arguments for burial and cremation are each compelling in their own ways.



Burial has immense emotional and spiritual appeal to many families. A funeral followed by a burial is a familiar process that gives many families a feeling of closure and a feeling that they are part of something bigger than just their own sorrow. For many, viewing the body of their loved one in a casket before burial gives a feeling of having said goodbye in person. Having a traditional gravesite to visit, perhaps surrounded by the graves of other family members, is an ongoing source of comfort and remembrance for many people. Some religions require burial, and prescribe exact timing and procedures to be taken, while in other religious traditions burial is simply treated as a natural and sanctified way of dealing with death. For some families in special circumstances, burial holds open the possibility of future exhumation, perhaps for genetic or criminal investigation, whereas cremation is final unless a DNA sample is kept. Finally, since burial has always been the way that most people in most ages and cultures have chosen, creating a meaningful funeral service in the presence of a casket with the body of the loved one calls on thousands of years of tradition for inspiration and creativity.

Families can still have any kind of funeral they choose with cremation, and many families choose burial along with cremation. Cremation may be a desirable or even necessary choice, but burial is often preferred to all other options. Many people think of cremation as an earth-friendly solution because it takes less space and uses fewer resources. Cremated remains are very transportable, and having the ashes of their loved one with them allows the family more time to plan and decide what to do. Cremation can be less costly overall, and the decision-making process is quicker and less complicated. Finally, there are so many options for what to do with cremated ashes that creative approaches abound, from turning your loved one into gemstones to seeing them become part of an ocean reef.

What makes some funeral services so meaningful?

The act of friends and family coming together to remember the life of a beloved person who has passed can be a powerful, fulfilling experience. Creating a funeral service together is one of the most positive ways that a family can navigate this difficult experience. Grief and mourning are emotional states that naturally search for a pathway to closure and healing, and from time immemorial sharing and celebrating memories of our loved one with friends and family in a funeral service has helped create those pathways.

Memories and love, along with grief and sadness are at the heart of every funeral and memorial service. Since every person at a service has a different relationship and history with the person being honored, the challenge for those planning the service is always to encompass everyone's memories. When this is accomplished all who come to the service, and those who hear of it later, are able to hold the departed person most dearly in their memories and their hearts.

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What questions should family members ask each other to help prepare the most meaningful funeral service?

The most important part of the process of gathering personal, in contrast with factual memorial information about a person, is to reach out to all the people who they cared about and who cared about them. That means as many people as can be reached because they are all part of the life that was lived. Whoever is in charge of gathering such personal memories will be talking with friends, co-workers, distant relatives, colleagues, past spouses and partners, children from one or more families – so many different people in the life of the person being remembered.

Unlike the facts of a person's life, there's no checklist that will cover all the personal information that is there to be gathered, but experienced funeral directors know that you can often get memories flowing by asking a few basic very human questions such as:

- Tell me how long did you know (name) and how did you first meet?
- Did your friendship begin immediately or develop over time? Tell me how that happened?
- Is there a particular story you remember that says it all about (name)? Something they would want us all to remember about them?
- How did the life of (name) inspire your own life and the lives of others?
- What do you value most about your memories of (name)?
- What do you think (name) would want you to say about them to other friends and family?



Why have funeral services with a cremation – isn't the whole idea to keep it simple?

Simple and affordable doesn't mean not meaningful and memorable. In fact, the cremation option doesn't exclude having any type of funeral service, traditional or contemporary, or any other format family may choose to enshrine the life of the person they have loved and now lost in their collective memory.

Many people who choose cremation in advance of their death also choose the kind of ceremony they want, so the funeral director may be in the best position to provide guidance where everyone is following the "last wishes" of the departed. In addition to burial or interment in a columbarium many funeral homes and cemeteries offer other options – a special field where remains are scattered; assistance with making arrangements like dispersal at sea; offering new "green" and environmentally friendly options. From traditional to highly unusual ceremonies an experienced funeral director is often the best place to turn for advice on your available options for honoring both the person's last wishes and the family's preferences.

Even if there hasn't been any advance planning there are a wide range of sometimes simple, sometimes intricate but always meaningful options for honoring and placing the ashes of a loved one. Funeral homes and cemeteries are seeing increasing numbers of families who want to be deeply involved in the creative aspects of remembering their loved one, and many funeral directors welcome this opportunity to go beyond the traditional and create new, more meaningful funerals.

Where can we find inspiration for a meaningful funeral service?

The internet is full of stories and pictures of ways that families have found and invented to honor their loved one. For families facing the challenge of coming up with a meaningful, personal tribute to their loved one, the shared experiences of others can be the best guide.

Many families use the services of experienced professionals to help find the right balance of ceremony and simplicity. On sites like Pinterest and Instagram there thousands of photos and videos of funerals and celebrations from across the spectrum. Facebook has a new "Tributes" section with a broad selection of memorial options. Spend an hour or two searching for key phrases like "personalized funeral" and "creative cremation" and you'll find hundreds of stories and photos of creative, thoughtful, beautiful ways people have honored the passing of one they love.

People choose to remember their loved one with events and expressions from intensely personal to boldly patriotic, from devoutly green to plainly political, from traditionally sacred to new age spiritual, and from most solemn to most unusual, and beyond. What makes any funeral service, memorial, or celebration meaningful is how well and truly it helps everyone remember and honor their love for the person who has now gone, not whether it is traditional or creative, simple or elaborate.

What's the best way to create a meaningful obituary?

Family members who find themselves needing to plan a meaningful funeral service for a loved one who has passed away need to know certain factual information as well as the understanding the personalized side of the upcoming memorial.

Every newspaper that prints obituaries has guidelines readily available that are essentially “fill in the blanks” guides for writing obituaries, and funeral directors are always able to be helpful in ensuring that things are done right.

A famous obituary writer offered great advice for any family member struggling with the factual part of writing an obituary:

“Ask a professional for help – the newspaper staff and funeral home are always ready, and they don’t make mistakes or leave out anyone or anything important.”

However, the key to a meaningful obituary just doesn’t lie in proper recitation of facts, although it’s important to get those right. The real meaning of a person’s life lies in the memories that live on in the hearts and minds of those who love them. Getting at those memories, recording them in some way, and incorporating them into the obituary is the key to writing a meaningful summation of a beloved life.

That same great obituary writer summed up the single most important point in writing an obituary:

“The aim is to make your obituary a lasting memorial worthy of a scrapbook – a tribute that gives family and friends something to be proud of long after the upheaval of loss.”